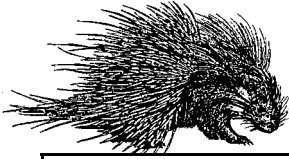


Porcupine!



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News from DEB

As I write from the epicentre of what might turn out to be a global pandemic, it may appear parochial to focus on local concerns. Yet despite government's repeated assertions that we are now retooling to become a 'knowledge-based' society, actions continue to speak louder than words. The most recently announced cuts of 10% off the total university budget (with a projected 12% for HKU) are on top of the 3% salary decrease already effected, and the 6% reduction that is in the pipeline. Most university running costs go on staff salaries so the outlook is not good. Furthermore, like the Hong Kong economy, the HKU endowment funds are performing badly so there is no financial cushion to break our fall. Things are set to get even bleaker, as in 2005 we can expect another cut of around 10% on top of the one already announced to take effect in 2004. Brother, can you spare a dime?

So where is the light at the end of the tunnel? To mix metaphors, I turn my attention to the other end of the telescope and look backward in time, to the very early 1980s. When I took up a lecturing post in the Department of Zoology at HKU in 1981, ecology and environmental science were scarcely neonatal. Hong Kong was focussed on making money, and looking fearfully over its shoulder at the recent tumult on the mainland. There was no

Joint Declaration, and the future was uncertain. What awareness there was of the natural environment was due, in large part, to the efforts of John Hodgkiss and Brian Morton who had arrived in Hong Kong (separately) more than a decade earlier.

Both of them had been impressed by the biological diversity of Hong Kong, and saw the effects that 'develop now, clean up later' approach was having on local environments. For a while it was scarcely possible to turn on a TV or tune onto RTHK without hearing one or other of them (sometimes, scarily, both) berating government about the state of our environment. Their approaches were different (meticulous argument *versus* often rather direct appeal to the emotion: "of course, it's pig shit"), but the objectives were the same. For some years Government remained obdurate in the face of criticism: flat denial, "... there is no pollution problem in Hong Kong ..." was the stock response. By the late 1980s, an incremental change began. Government had formed an Environmental Protection Department; their response to Hodgkiss and Morton, as well as a growing clamour of other voices, was to admit that there was some pollution, but to deny it was as bad as their critics stated.

In some respects, things are much the same today. Academics and conservationists are still railing at government inaction (specifically, its lack of a long-promised conservation policy), but a transition has taken place. Many post-graduate students trained by Hodgkiss, Morton and others have positions in government, where they can influence the management and conservation of our countryside and inshore waters. Others are in universities where they train their own students in environmental matters. There is a university department devoted to the study of ecology and biodiversity, and three marine laboratories. There are both new and mature NGOs, some of them undertaking important biodiversity research in China (KFBG) and others (such as Green Power and WWF) with an education remit and popular visitor centres. There is a new C in AFCD, a RAMSAR site, marine parks and reserves, plus a wetland park under development. There are water pollution control zones, waste-water standards, and an annual closed season on fishing. And, of course, there is *Porcupine!* Honorable mention too to *Hong Kong Discovery*.

Why am I writing this now? Firstly, because it is important to remember, in these rather depressing times that, despite some setbacks and losses, much has been achieved. Secondly, because both John H. and Brian M. are retiring from HKU at the end of June 2003. This is a good time to remind ourselves that the positive aspects of the present situation are, in good part, a reflection of their tireless efforts over the years: in research, in teaching and in community service. Neither of them would want, or expect, acknowledgement for their actions. Nevertheless, on behalf of the readers of *Porcupine!* I thank them for helping us get to where we are now. We wish them and their families the very best for the future.

David Dudgeon